U.V. Swaminatha Iyer

K. V. Jagannathan

Makers of Indian Literature

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The sculpture reproduced on the end paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Śuddhodana the dream of Queen Māyā, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

U.V. Swaminatha Iyer

English rendering by
Prema Nandakumar

based on a Tamil monograph by
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Foreword

Two great scholars who were born in the latter half of the last century and passed away in this, gained great fame by serving the cause of Tamil literature. One was the well-known poet, Subramania Bharati; the other was Mahamahopadhyaya Doctor U. V. Swaminatha Iyer. Bharati ornamented Mother Tamil by composing superb poems. Iyer discovered the two thousand year old Sangham classics and other great works of the past and brought out excellent editions. Thanks to these classics, the world has come to know of the ancient history and culture of the Tamils. Scholars in several countries were attracted by them and engaged themselves in Tamil research. And international conferences on Tamil have also been held. These are sure to continue in the future as well.

The horizons of Tamil literature which had led up before to Kamban's *Rāmāyana* and Villipputtūrār's *Bhārata* were now extended. Everyone was astonished, and praised the unique culture of the ancient Tamils. Though the Sangham classics belong to a remote past, they are very stimulating to study for the learners of today.

Iyer, who discovered the Sangham classics, also produced several works of prose. As a corollary to his edition of *Manimēkalai*, he wrote a summary of *Manimēkalai* and essays on the three jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, Sangha and Dharma. As a part of the *Perunkathai* edition, he wrote the life of Udayana.

Iyer also wrote the biographies of his teacher, Mahavidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai, and others. He recorded his experiences during his journeys in search of palm-leaf manuscripts. Essays on incidents from Sangham classics poured out of his pen. The forewords of his editions are examples of his rich prose style. All these put tegether literally form a golden treasury of Tamil literature.

Iyer who was involved in editing, biographical writing, research and the recordation of personal experiences, passed away in April 1942 in his eighty-eighth year. The life of one who learnt Tamil from childhood, taught Tamil to others and published detailed editions of ancient classics, documents many precious facts.

This publication is a short account of the great scholar's inspiring life. His life had many facets like discipleship, teaching, editorial work and authorship. I have tried to indicate the salient points in them. I have also included a chapter on his prose style.

Subramania Bharati sang of Iyer: "As long as Tamil lives you will know the praise of poets, the gratitude of their hearts, and shine immortal". Yes, the great scholar lives for ever, his fame undimmed as long as the Tamil language is cherished by us.

4.11.82 **K.V. Jagannathan**

1

Grandsire of Tamil

Towards the close of the last century and the dawn of this, two great men performed incandescent service to Mother Tamil. One of them reclaimed her ancient ornaments called the Sangham literature, and brought out sterling editions of the classics to decorate her. The other poet wrote new works as shining jewels. The former was my teacher, Mahamahopadhyaya Doctor U. V. Swaminatha Iyer. The latter was Subramania Bharati. Owing to the tireless efforts of Iyer, *Jeevaka Chintāmani* was published for the first time, It was followed by *Pattu Pāttu* (The Ten Idylls) and the Buddhist epic, *Manimēkalai*. He also edited five works of the 'Ettu Tohai' group. Inspired by him, others began sleuthing among old palm-leaf manuscripts to bring out excellent editions of ancient Tamil classics.

The publication of these old Tamil writings triggered off a tremendous renaissance in Tamil letters. The classics proved to be a valuable source to learn about the life-style, culture and history of the Tamils two thousand years ago. Naturally, scholars all over the world were delighted and began to examine the Sangham works critically. These writings of the distant past were not merely conglomerations of abstruse mythology, not mere classics to be noticed only in book exhibitions. Though 2000 years old, we are able to relate them historically and sociologically to the Tamil ethos down the centuries. This is what made the Sangham classics widely popular, along with latter-day poems like Kamban's *Ramayana*, the moment Iyer's editions began to see the light of day. This led to widespread interest in the origins and unbroken history of Tamil language and literature paving the way for international seminars and conferences on the subject. Tamil had entered a

New Age in its glorious history.

Swaminatha Iyer was, of course, the prime-mover of this New Age in Tamil letters. He was destined to lead an active life till the end. By the time he passed away in his eighty-seventh year, Tamil had been vitalised and made strong at all levels. What had seemed a remote dream in Iyer's boyhood and youth had become an inspiring reality. Historical personalities like Pāri and Adikamān were no more mere names. Even little school children came to know of their great deeds of compassion and heroism. Literary critics found in the classics a veritable treasure-trove of sublime poetry. They took up the study of Sangham literature with zest and interpreted the superior nuances in the poems to the common reader, thus transforming remote classics into popular best-sellers. The Tamilian had truly rediscovered his eminent heritage.

2

Early Education

The village of Uttamadanapuram was originally a gift to forty-eight Brahmins by a King of Thanjavur. Traditional scholarship and intellectual integrity were an assured possession of the villagers. At the dawn of the 19th century, here lived Venkatachala Iyer, a poor teacher who belonged to the Ashta-sahasra group of Saivite Brahmins. He had two sons: Venkata Subbier and Srinivasier. Swaminathan was the son of the former and was born on 19 February, 1855.

The future scholar began learning his alphabet from his grandfather who also taught him several hymns. Venkata Subbier's maternal grand-uncle was the music savant, Ghanam Krishnier. Of the three modes of classical music—the Ghana, the Naya and the Desika—he had specialised in the Ghana style, generally described as very difficult. Venkata Subbier learnt music from him and hoped that Swaminathan would also learn music and scale the heights in that divine art. Swaminathan was not averse to music, but from his childhood he was passionately in love with Tamil. Indeed, Tamil was to be the very breath of his life.

Venkata Subbier shifted to Ariyalur and earned his livelihood by giving lectures and musical discourses on the *Ramayana*. It was a hand-to-mouth existence and the struggle to keep the hearth warm was quite demanding. As a fond parent he hoped that his son would one day take up this profession and earn a good income, as Swaminathan had an aptitude for music as well as literature. The boy was placed under the tutelage of Swaminatha Ayyar, who was well-versed in music and Sanskrit. He taught his eager student some minor Sanskrit works. His uncle also helped him in his studies and music lessons. Drawing

was a favourite pastime too, and he could also cut out paper flowers with expertise. He had a sensitive imagination and an early absorption in Sanskrit literature helped him enjoy the beauty of nature which is at its best in the obscure villages of the Kavery delta.

His maternal grandfather Krishna Sastri was a great devotee of Siva who made the boy promise that he would repeat the Lord's name as many times as possible. He scrupulously adhered to the promise and it became a habit with him to murmur the Lord's name during his leisure time.

Those were the days when the Tamil language lay spurned by the Tamilians themselves. English education was the passport to success and attempt was made to teach him English. He showed scant interest in the foreign tongue. The conventions of training in classical music included a knowledge of the Telugu language. But Telugu too did not capture his imagination.

However, love of Tamil surfaced early in his life. The popular Tamil opera, *Nandanār Charithram* of Gopalakrishna Bharati attracted his attention and he learnt most of the songs in it, singing them whenever the mood seized him. At Ariyalur he came in contact with the poet-musician, Satagopa Iyengar, who gave him some lessons in Tamil. A good scholar who had mastered Kamban's *Ramayana*, Iyengar could explain the highly allusive Tamil verses with entertaining verve. The young pupil gained a life-long love for Tamil thanks to this teacher.

When Iyer was seven, his thread-investiture ceremony was performed and he was given the name of Venkatarama Sarma during the function. But he continued to be addressed as Sama by everybody, that being the abbreviation for Swaminathan, the presiding deity of Tiruveragam. He learnt the appropriate mantric chants from his uncle Sivaramier and began observing Sandhyavandana regularly.

Venkata Subbier now moved over to nearby Kunnam where the inhabitants promised him a steady income in return for his musical lectures on Hindu scriptures. Here the Tamil scholar Chidambaram Pillai taught Iyer some minor Tamil classics as well as *Tiruvilayādal Purānam*. Iyer's love of Tamil was now turning into an obsession. There were kindly teachers willing to help him understand and enjoy the nuances in Tamil poetry. One of them was Kasthuri Ranga Iyengar of Karkudi who

taught him grammatical works like *Nannool* and *Navanītha Pāttiyal.* About this time Iyer began composing verses in classical metres playing 'the sedulous ape' to great poets like Thayumanavar and Pattinathar. There was nothing significantly original about such versification, but the exercise certainly helped to strengthen the base of his Tamil scholarship.

Even as Iyer was gaining a solid grounding in Tamil literature, his father decided to get him married. Iyer was presently married to Madhurambal on 16 June 1868. This meant no outward change in his life. The family was still in monetary difficulties, and he had no desire to take up English or music that would provide him with job opportunities. As he recounts in his autobiography:

> I did not find satisfaction in marriage or money or travel. I had only one burning desire in me. Tamil was my wealth; that alone was food for my thirst for knowledge; the more I could gain contacts with it, the greater my joy, satisfaction, inspiration. This attitude has not changed throughout my life.

Sensing his son's aspirations, Venkata Subbier placed him under the tutelage of Vridhachalam Reddiar of Chenganam. Reddiar was a well-read man and taught his ward *Yāpparungala Kārikai*, the rather stern textbook on Tamil prosody. Incidentally, Reddiar would speak often of great Tamil scholars and teachers. Referring to Meenakshisundaram Pillai, the famous *āsthana vidwān* of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt, Reddiar would go into raptures. Iyer now began to dream of going to the Mahavidwan as his student and gain a wide and deep knowledge of the Tamil literary wealth. Fortunately there were several elderly friends of his father who assured the family that the Mahavidwan was the best person to foster Iyer's knowledge.

But Venkata Subbier was in a fix. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was residing in Mayuram. Subbier could not afford to set up house in a strange town for the sake of the boy's stay. But he had abundant faith in Divine Grace. He was sure that if only the Tamil savant would agree to be the guide, his son would surely blossom into a full-fledged scholar. Besides, Subbier's friend, Gopalakrishna Bharati, was in Mayuram. The fond father thought that Bharati, the renowned author of *Nandanār Charithram*, could train the boy in classical music as well. He decided to go to Mayuram and meet Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

3

Student of Meenakshisundaram Pillai

In Mayuram, Meenakshisundaram Pillai lived in a house close to a building that belonged to the Tiruavaduturai Mutt. Scholar extraordinary of Tamil letters, Pillai was by now a living legend. Author of several sthala-puranas and the devotional classic *Sekkizhār Pillai-t- amil*, he was essentially an ideal teacher of Tamil language and literature and was attached to the Mutt. Iyer's father accompanied him to Pillai's house. On their being announced, Pillai came out to meet his visitors. Dressed like a Saivite devotee, the teacher made a profound impression on the adolescent mind of Iyer who found himself transported into a world of blissful fulfilment. He has recorded the experience:

> As that poet-scholar walked towards me, I was attracted by his figure. He walked slowly and majestically like an elephant. A full-grown figure, a slight paunch, hands that touched the knees, a broad forehead, a tiny tuft and pure white dress made him appear as a person born to wealth. But his face showed not the excitement that marks a wealthy person. There was only peace there, as if he were an ocean whose waves had grown calm and still. The eyes were not piercing sharp. But they were not indifferent either. They gazed upon what was in front with soft looks. His walk was steady, and a certain tiredness due to a lifetime's struggle was visible. His figure conveyed inspiration. No laziness, nor anxiety nor tiredness. A garland of rudraksha beads lay around his neck. I was like a devotee who was waiting for the appearance of the Lord at the end of a long tapas. He came as a Lord to such a devotee. My eyes went to him. Waves of excitement rose within me. As a result, tears sprang to my eyes.

After introducing himself, Venkata Subbier mentioned a common friend, Gopalakrishna Bharati. He also told Pillai

about Iyer's great love to master Tamil literature. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was pleased and tested the boy, made him recite a poem and gently elicited answers from him by questioning him closely. Venkata Subbier anxiously looked at Pillai and said: "I am placing this boy in your charge. Please accept him. When can he start regular lessons?"

The great man mused for a while and then spoke: "People do keep coming here for studies now and then. But after a short while they go away though they continue to boast of having been my students. But their half-baked knowledge is of no use to them or to others. Nor do I gain any satisfaction".

Iyer's father interposed. "This boy will not behave like that. He will stay with you as long as you wish him to. You can take your own time to train him in Tamil letters. He has no other responsibilities just now".

Pillai was satisfied and wished to know what arrangements were being made for the boy's board at Mayuram. Iyer's father requested Pillai to be kind enough to take up that responsibility as well.

"I can see to it that he is fed properly when I am in Tiruavaduturai and Pattiswaram. But in this town I do not have the necessary resources", he replied.

Venkata Subbier assured Pillai that he would manage to send a monthly allowance to meet the boy's needs. Pillai then agreed to take Iyer as his student and said that an auspicious time may be fixed to begin lessons. Iyer was transported with joy. Thus began his studentship in a mood of happy expectancy, and he entered the second major period in his life.

However, though acceptance had been easy enough, for quite some time Iyer could not have lessons from Pillai himself. He was assigned to one of the older students, a lovable Christian lad named Saverinatha Pillai. Though Saverinatha was a good scholar and taught well, Iyer hankered for direct lessons from the Master. He waited for an opportunity to gain the master's attention and have his lessons explained by him.

An inborn poet, Meenakshisundaram Pillai was a lover of nature. He had recently transplanted a few trees in the backyard of his house with scientific care. He was naturally worried about their taking root in the alien soil and hence went about anxiously searching for new shoots every morning. Observing

this, Iyer too woke up long before it was dawn, and made a note of new shoots in the plants. As soon as Pillai entered the garden, he would point out the tender leaves that had sprung up overnight. Pillai was pleased by this thoughtful gesture on the part of the boy. He began talking to Iyer freely. One day he asked Iyer what lesson he was studying then.

"I am learning *Naishadam*. It would be a privilege if you would yourself teach me the classic", the boy said in all humility. From then onwards Meenakshisundaram Pillai placed Iyer under his personal tutelage. The first text they took up was 'Tirukkudanthai Tiripandadi' composed by Pillai. Pillai was pleased to note Iyer's flaming love for Tamil, his quick grasp of the finer points of literature and his sincerity. He began to teach for long hours and proceeded speedily with the lessons. For Iyer this was a grand feast indeed:

> I was very hungry for Tamil. When I had been taught by others, it was like feeding an elephant's hunger with a handful of puffed rice. I came to Pillai and lo! I was given a sumptuous feast. The feast of Tamil. It assuaged my hunger. Sometimes I was an unequal receptacle. I then realised that I need not worry any more about the lack of Tamil learning.

Iyer studied several works under the Mahavidwan. These included a number of *antādi* and *pillai-t-tamil* poems. If the Mahavidwan was a perfect teacher, Iyer was an ideal student. They were one in their love of Tamil. Both profited by coming together. Even as Pillai poured into the student's receptive ears his Tamil scholarship garnered during a life-time, Iyer absorbed the torrents of Tamil language and literature. A teacher has always a special love for the sincere student. It is not surprising, then, that the great poet-scholar came to love Iyer deeply.

4

Learning at Tiruavaduturai

One day as a lesson was in progress, Pillai asked Iyer suddenly: "Why did they name you Venkataraman?" "Our family deity is Venkateswara. I was named after that deity", Iyer replied. "Are you called by any other name?" "Yes, my people call me Sama, the shortened form of Swaminathan". Pillai expressed a wish to call Iyer by that name. Thus Swaminathan became Iyer's official name. Today the Tamil world pays homage fondly to this beloved name.

As suggested by his father, Iyer used to go to Gopalakrishna Bharati in the mornings for his music lessons. Once Bharati mentioned this to Pillai when they met. Later on, Pillai questioned Iyer about this. Iyer humbly said: "My father asked me to, so as to keep me in practice and retain what I have already learnt", Pillai was not enthusiastic. "If one gets into the world of music, the mind will lose the concentration needed for a life of scholarship", was his comment.

Iyer realised that Pillai had no interest in music. Besides, there was some truth in what he had said. Straightaway he went to Bharati and excused himself from attending music lessons. And about this time he began composing poetry again in Tamil.

After some months, Iyer accompaned Meenakshisundaram Pillai to Tiruavaduturai. Melakaram Subramania Desikar was then the Head of the famous Mutt in that place. He was widely respected for his scholarship and moral eminence. Iyer was filled with happiness to mark the special esteem with which Pillai was received in the Mutt and how he spoke easily and sweetly with everyone. Desikar's affection for Pillai appeared to be legendary. This time Desikar asked Pillai to stay on at

the Mutt for some time, as many of his *tampirans* (spiritual novitiates) wished to have advance lessons in Tamil. When Pillai introduced Iyer to him, Desikar made the usual enquiries and asked the boy to recite a verse. He was delighted when Iyer recited the verse musically and gave word-for-word explanation as well.

Subramania Desikar belonged to the family of the famous poet, Tirikoota Rajappa Kavirayar. Since the verse Iyer had chosen at random was from the Kavirayar's *Tirukutrāla Yamaka Antādi*, and as he was also a connoisseur of classical music, Desikar was doubly happy. He was gratified to know from Pillai that the new student was deeply attached to Tamil literature at a time when love for English learning was sweeping the educational scene.

The scenes of Siva worship at Tiruavaduturai caused wonderment to Iyer. The Mutt was widely respected as it had the distinguished leadership of Desikar. The *tampirans* had long tresses and wore ochre robes. They wore the *Ārukatti* and *Sundaravedam* ornaments. With so many people in the dress of renuciation, and each going about his assigned job with quiet assurance, Tiruavaduturai was indeed like the capital of Saivism.

Desikar once again requested Pillai to stay on in Tiruavaduturai and teach the inmates of the Mutt. Pillai's presence would be a source of pleasure to Desikar as well. Pillai agreed. But Arumugatha Pillai of Pattiswaram requested Desikar to allow the Mahavidwan to come over to his village for a while. Desikar agreed.

On the way from Tiruavaduturai to Pattiswaram, Iyer met Tyagaraja Chettiar who was a Tamil pundit at the Government College, Kumbakonam. Chettiar was famous as a teacher. Iyer took an immediate liking to him. Chettiar had a fair complexion, and was the picture of health and had a sprightly gait. His sharp eyes missed nothing and his bold talk was impressive. Chettiar enquired Iyer about the latter's studies and received suitable answers. "Would you be able to teach others?" asked Chettiar. "I would of course try my best", replied Iyer. For a while their conversation centred around Pillai Chettiar advised Iyer not to waste even a moment and concentrate upon his lessons, for to be Pillai's student was a

rare privilege which could mould one into an ideal teacher.

The Pattiswaram sojourn was interesting in several ways. While at this place, Iyer was able to visit several temples that were close by and learn about their historical and legendary importance from his master. He also studied the Puranas of Nagai and Mayuram.

Arumugatha Pillai's household in Pattiswaram had certain strange rules of functioning. At 9 p. m. everyone would retire for rest. Amumugatha Pillai would rise at midnight, wake up his relations and guests and proceed for dinner. Many in the Mahavidwan's entourage were irked by this strange rule but they kept quiet. Harsh by nature, Arumugatha Pillai was unpredictable. They dared not displease him as he was a very important man of the place. He would respect no one except Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Even Iyer was a butt of his ridicule and anger.

One of Pillai's senior students, Saverinatha Pillai, used to come often from Mayuram. It was he who boldly put an end to the midnight dinners. He addressed Arumugatha Pillai with an impromptu verse: "Brahma has not made us into trees to suffer the pangs of hunger at midnight in Pattiswaram!" By convincing his host gently, Saverinathu saw to it that everyone had his dinner early. His fellow-students praised him heartily. Six months were thus spent at Pattiswaram. During these days Iyer came into contact with some of the leading personalities of Tamil Nadu and gained an abundant insight into the human psyche as well.

During his stay, he made a trip to his native place, Uttamadanapuram, for Saraswati Puja. But as he wished to study something new from his master on the auspicious Vijayadasami day, he returned to Pattiswaram and began studying the *Naishadam*. On his first meeting with Pillai, he had recited from *Naishadam*. Now he began reading the entire classic again under the Mahavidwan's guidance.

Towards the end of his Pattiswaram stay, Iyer went to Kottur where his parents were staying. Unfortunately he contracted fever and was bedridden for several weeks. He decided to rest for a while and then go straight to Tiruavaduturai where Pillai was expected for the Gurupuja celebrations.

The Gurupuja of Sri Namachchivaya Murti, the founder of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt, takes place in December-January and is a major festival for the town. People from all walks of life converge upon the pilgrim centre. Worship of Siva is conducted in every possible manner. Music recitals, poetry recitations and scholarly Sanskrit discussions apart from religious festivities, mark the days. All who come to Tiruavaduturai are fed free.

When Iyer met Pillai here, the latter first made sure that his student would accompany him to Mayuram later and continue his studies. This was indicative of Pillai's anxiety to retain Iyer as his student. The Gurupuja Day revealed to Iyer new facets in his master's personality. Pillai's tremendous powers for spontaneous composition were in evidence when one after another came poetasters who begged him for an impromptu verse in praise of Desikar. The great poet would oblige them. They would then go to Desikar seated in the audience hall, recite the verse and would receive a suitable cash award and go their way. Of course Desikar knew the real hand behind the adulatory verses. The next moring when Pillai went to Desikar to pay his respects, the benign pontiff said with a smile: "Ah, our dear Pillai has had no rest throughout the night!"

After a short stay at Mayuram, Pillai returned to Tiruavaduturai. It was while journeying in the cart that Pillai began to compose the *Ambar Purānam*. The poet's imagination grew wings as they passed through the rural scene. Iyer wrote down the verses amidst the shaking and the bumping in the cart on the country road. Iyer's handwriting was irregular because of this but the noble grandeur and planned regularity with which poesy gushed out of Pillai's creative imagination was truly a remarkable phenomenon.

At Tiruavaduturai it was decided to divide the classes into two sections. A problem arose with Iyer. Was he to be bracketted with the seniors or the juniors? Asked for his preference, Iyer said that he would like to attend both the classes. And so he went through a very tight programme but at the same time derived a double advantage. Besides, he was placed in charge of reciting musically the verses being taught by the Master.

5

At The Feet of The Master

Swaminatha Iyer's biography of Meenakshisundaram Pillai is now a classic. There was an ideal relationship between the two, and their years together mark an educationist's delight. In Iyer's retelling of those days, we relive an intensely human drama that is fascinating. Once due to a slight misunderstanding, Pillai remained somewhat indifferent to Iyer. Iyer felt helpess. One night Pillai was having dinner with the inmates of the Mutt. Strict rules of protocol govern the dining hall in the Mutt where the pontiff himself sits at the head of the line. No one gets up when the dinner is half-way through as that would be showing disrespect to Desikar. However, that night Pillai was restless and hurried out before everybody else. When he saw Iyer lying on the stone bench in the dark, he enquired ansciously: "Is that Swaminatha Iyer? Have you had your dinner?" Iyer was deeply moved and replied in the affirmative. Was this incarnate love capable of indifference towards him? The next day Iyer's friends congratulated him: "Now we can see the depth of affection Pillai has for you. To have got up from dinner half-way through!"

Iyer met the legendary musician Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer for the first time at Tiruavaduturai. On Desikar's request, the musician sang soulfully several *kirtanas*. This was literally divine music for Iyer. Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer's elder brother had written an opera on the Saiva classic, *Peria Purānam*. A few songs from the opera as well as some songs composed by Meenakshisundaram Pillai were the choice of the day. Iyer was delighted with the graceful word-movements in his master's compositions.

During this time, Pillai once happened to be at Mayuram. Subramania Tampiran of Tirupperundurai wanted a new *purāna*

to be composed on that pilgrim centre. The best person for the job was of course Meenakshisundaram Pillai, and he requested Desikar to speak to the Mahavidwan on his behalf. Desikar immediately sent Iyer to Mayuram with a message. Iyer covered the distance on foot and met Pillai who felt delighted and spontaneously recited a verse praising Lord Vinayaka at Tiruppererundurai:

"We shall live meditating
On the Veyil Uvantha Vinayakar
Whose tresses are bright
Like pearly moonlight."

Pillai and Iyer returned to Tiruavaduturai. Towards the end of 1872, Iyer was infected with small-pox. He was studying the *Peria Purānam* at this time. Pillai looked after him with loving care and sent the boy to Suryamulai in a covered palanquin. Iyer's father and maternal uncle nursed him through the anxious days of the dreaded illness.

1873 was the year of Mahamakam at Kumbakonam. Subramania Desikar and his large entourage camped in the holy city. Mahamakam is a much-awaited religious event for Saivites, and Iyer felt unhappy that he could not avail himself of the opportunity. When he recovered, he went straight to Tiruavaduturai.

This was the time when he was drawn rather close to Tyagaraja Chettiar whom he used to meet often in Kumbakonam. Once Chettiar brought him a teaching offer. "Appu Sastrigal is planning to open a new school in the city. He is my good friend. He needs a Tamil pundit. Shall I recommend your name?" he asked. These were difficult days for Iyer's parental home, and he was indeed looking out for some means to help his father financially. But Meenakshisundaram Pillai was not in favour of the proposal. He told Chettiar that this was a time to absorb learning. "Let him be with me. He can take up a job later if he wants to." Iyer was overwhelmed by such thoughtful consideration on the part of the master towards his well-being. There was indeed the divine Grace guiding his life!

Pillai went to Tirupperunturai in December, 1973. Iyer and Saverinatha Pillai accompanied him. They were somewhat awed

by the legendary greatness of the shrine, and noted with joy the special honours performed for Manikkavachakar, the author of the Saivite classic, *Tiruvāchagam,* which marks one of the dizzy heights of Tamil literature.

Though they had arrived here for the release of the *sthala purāna* composed by Pillai, the work was far from complete. However, the great poet used to compose a considerable number of verses when he found leisure and would recite and explain them to the public on the following day. This was an astonishing phenomenon which impressed the adolescent mind of Iyer deeply.

Iyer spent the February of 1874 in his parental home taking the necessary medicines. He found the family in debt and his father's income not enough to make both ends meet. Iyer's father wanted him to give up his studies and take up the calling of a *paurānika*, an itinerant village preacher. The nearby villages would welcome the young scholar. Iyer agreed and went to Chenganam and Karai and gave lectures on *Tiruvilayādal Purānam.* This enabled him to meet many lovers of Tamil. However, Iyer's mind was not at rest. The rare good fortune of being Pillai's favoured student was not to be missed. By now Pillai had gone to Ambar where he was releasing the *Ambar Puranam* composed by him. Iyer met him in Ambar and returned to his student life.

However, since Iyer had come away to Ambar without completing his lecture series on *Tiruvilayādal Purānam* in Karai, he returned to Karai for a few days and completed the lectures. People in that village wanted him to stay on for some more time and lecture in nearby places. But Iyer could no more think of absenting himself from studies. He explained his aim gently, took leave of his well-wishers and returned to his master at Tiruvaduturai.

Vedanayakam Pillai, a former Munsiff of Mayuram and the author of the first Tamil novel, *Pratāpa Mudaliyar Charithram,* came to visit Desikar. Iyer was moved by the mutual respect the great men had for each other.

Iyer's beloved master, the great poet-scholar Meenakshisundaram Pillai, passed away on 1 January, 1876. Till his last breath, Pillai's thoughts were anchored in Tamil literature. Even when he was struggling for breath on the last day, he

cleared some doubts in *Tiruvāchagam* for the benefit of his student. With Pillai's withdrawal, a pall of gloom descended upon the pilgrim centre. Iyer was overcome with profound sorrow. As he wept bitterly, Subramania Desikar consoled him:

"We have lost an irreplaceable gem. What can we do? Pillai had great affection for you. You can continue to be a student of the Mutt and have your lessons from me."

Thus it came to pass that Iyer became Desikar's student. Among the works he studied now were Kamban's *Ramayana*, *Nannool* and Saiva Siddhanta scriptures. Desikar also asked Iyer to teach the novitiates in the Mutt. About this time Chokkikulam Annamalai Reddiar of 'Kavadi Chintu' fame came to Tiruavaduturai. He desired to study some Tamil works in detail and Iyer helped him.

6

Teaching at Tiruavaduturai, Kumbakonam

Subramania Desikar had a new house built for Iyer as he wanted the young man to have a place of his own. As desired by Desikar, Iyer's parents set up house there in the November of 1877. Iyer's wife too joined him. The Mutt supplied the necessities of life for the family. All were pleasantly surprised and immensely gratified by the affection displayed by Desikar towards Iyer and Iyer's own faultless conduct.

The *kumbhabhishekam* of the Meenakshi temple at Madurai was drawing near and Subramania Desikar wished to attend it. He also planned to visit several places of pilgrimage in South Tamil Nadu. When he invited Iyer to join his entourage, the young man was overjoyed. They all participated in the consecration festivities. It was here that Iyer met Justice Mani Iyer who was to help him in several ways in the future.

From Madurai they journeyed to Tirunelveli and stayed in the mutt building of Tiruavaduturai in the West Car Street. A number of poets and scholars came to meet Desikar and this meant an enrichment of Iyer's Tamil knowledge. From Tirunelveli Desikar went to Javantipuram where the Deputy Pontiff of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt, Venuvanalinga Tampiran, had constructed a new building and named it 'Subramania Desikar Vilasam'. The poets who attended the inaugural function composed verses praising the building. Iyer was asked to collect the lyrics and produce a commemorative volume. The renowned exegetist who was to publish legendary editions of the Sangham classics began his editorial life with this venture! The first page of the booklet has the following:

May Ganapati guard us. Volume in praise of Subramania Desika Vilasam built in Javantipuram by Venuvanalinga Tampiran, the Senior Karbar of Tiruavaduturai Mutt that traces itself to the Kailasa tradition. Also in praise of Venuvanalinga Vilasam, a hall of audience built by the same Swamigal at Tiruavaduturai. Several poets have contributed to this volume edited by Arumuga Swamigal of the above-mentioned Mutt and Swaminatha Iyer, son of Venkata Subbier of Tiruavaduturai. Printed at Tirunelveli Muthamilakaram Press. Year: Bahudanya. Month: Ani

From Javantipuram Iyer accompanied Subramania Desikar to Kutralam, Sankaran Koil, Tiruchendur and other holy places before returning to Tiruavaduturai Mutt. These peregrinations have found rich recordation in the later writings of Iyer.

Tyagaraja Chettiar came to Tiruavaduturai on 12 February 1880. He made a request to Subramania Desikar:

"I am going to retire from my job. The College authorities need a capable person to succeed me. We can recommend Swaminatha Iyer. It would help him immensely".

At first Subramania Desikar was reluctant to part with Iyer. But Tyagaraja Chettiar was persuasive and got Desikar's permission. An auspicious hour was fixed for Iyer's journey to Kumbakonam. Desikar gave his blessings when Iyer came to take leave of him:

"Not only should you capably fill Tyagaraja Chettiar's post but you should also be enabled to go to Madras and succeed to the chair made famous by eminent scholars such as Tandavaraya Mudaliyar, Mahalinga Iyer and Visaka Perumalier and gain great fame."

These words of love and affection were to come true. Whenever Iyer happened to remember these words in his later life, he would be deeply moved.

At Kumbakonam, Iyer was tested by Chettiar's colleagues from different disciplines. The verses chosen by them were explained to their satisfaction by him. After all, he had studied thoroughly the works from which the verses had been taken. When asked whether he could compose verses on his own, he replied in the affirmative. Immediately he was asked to address a verse to Tyagaraja Chettiar. Iyer recited the following verse in a few minutes:

In the same order
That we learnt Tamil
From the scholar Meenakshisundaram
Whose fame shines everywhere,
It would be proper
If you make me your successor
At the Kumbakonam College,
O noble Tyagaraja,
Doyen of Tamil scholars!

The lecturers whe were present were astonished and said that it was perhaps not quite surprising as Iyer's master had been Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Gopala Rao, the Principal of the College who was present, was satisfied and said that Iyer could join his post with immediate effect. From now began a new chapter in Iyer's career; he was to teach students as a lecturer in a college.

In the beginning, Gopala Rao used to come to his class and watch. The Principal was pleased with the manner in which Iyer held the attention of the students by making his explanations simple and interesting.

Iyer would go often to Tiruavaduturai and appraise Subramania Desikar of his experiences. Desikar was immensely gratified to know that Iyer was gaining rich experience and also a good name as a teacher.

Within a few months of his joining the Kumbakonam College, a son was born to Iyer. The child was named Kalyanasundaram as he was considered a gift of Kalyana Sundareswara, the presiding deity of Tirunallur.

7

Editor Par Excellence

Salem Ramaswami Mudaliyar was working as Munsiff at Kumbakonam when Iyer joined the College. Mudaliyar was well versed in Tamil, Sanskrit and music. Subramania Desikar asked Iyer to visit him some time and cultivate his friendship. Iyer first met Mudaliyar on 21 October 1880 and told him about his studies under the aegis of Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Subramania Desikar. Mudaliyar wanted to know the titles of the works Iyer had studied in detail. Iyer gave an impressive list of several *antāti*, *pillai-t-tamil* and *kōvai* poems. "Of what use are they?" exclaimed Mudaliyar. Iyer was astonished by such indifference. He gave out some more names in Tamil literature and assured Mudaliyar that he had studied Kamban's *Ramayana* also.

> "These are works of a later period. Have you studied the ancient Tamil classics? Have you studied *Jeevaka Chintāmani* and *Manimékalai*?"

Iyer was somewhat non-plussed but replied boldly that if he were given the palm-leaf manuscripts, he would surely make an attempt to get at their significance.

A few days later when he went to see Ramaswami Mudaliyar, the latter gave him a paper manuscript of *Jeevaka Chintāmani*. A first reading only landed him in confusion. However, as the manuscript contained the commentary of Nachchinarkiniyar, Iyer went through the poem several times and gained a fair view of the contents. As desired by Mudaliyar, he read out the poem and explained it, taking care to confess ignorance whenever the meaning appeared obscure. Mudaliyar was pleased

by Iyer's sincerity. As *Chintāmani* was a Jain classic, Iyer went to the homes of Jains in Kumbakonam to get some doubts cleared. Reading the epic after learning about the Jain religion, philosophy and traditions, the meaning became clearer. The desire was now upon him that a good edition of the epic should see the light of day. He collated several manuscript versions and arrived at a definitive one.

As Madras seemed the best place to get it printed, Iyer stayed there for two weeks. There were several well-known writers then residing at Madras whom he met often. Chakravarthi Rajagopalachariar of Teralundur came forward to help him with the printing and proof-reading. Iyer also eagerly corrected the proofs. He was quite excited by his good fortune of being the first to publish an ancient classic, and fulfilled the task with enthusiasm. He printed 500 copies.

There was a renaissance in Tamil letters after this publication of *Jeevaka Chintamani*. The editor had indicated the works from which examples had been used by the ancient commentator, and had himself added some passages for the purposes of comparison. Thus the edition was literally a treasury of ancient Tamil classics. This pleased the discerning public.

These days of fulfilment, however, were clouded by unexpected sad news. Subramania Desikar, renowned Head of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt, passed away on 7 January 1888. Iyer was then at Madras. When a letter brought him the news, Iyer was overwhelmed by grief. He has noted down his feelings in his autobiography:

> I stood rooted to the spot. Everything appeared frozen. My hands would not touch a book. It was as if the flow of blood in my veins had stopped. I remembered with gratitude the way in which he had encouraged me in each of my ventures and how he felt happy like a mother when honours came to me and how he guarded me with unbounded generosity.
>
> There was no way to lessen my grief. My sorrow flowed out as a verse. When I remembered that it would not be given to me to see his figure anymore, his form that had been engraven in my heart appeared before me.

Iyer left Madras the same night and reached Tiruavaduturai.

Sri Ambalavana Desikar was installed as the new pontiff. The Gurupuja ceremonies were held with due solemnity. Iyer took part in them and regained his self-composure and enthusiasm.

Even before the grief of losing Subramania Desikar had faded, Tyagaraja Chettiar who had helped Iyer in many ways passed away. The year 1888 thus ended on a gloomy note.

Immediately after the publication of *Jeevaka Chintāmani*, Iyer began his research in *Pattu-p-Pāttu* (The Ten Idylls). *Jeevaka Chintāmani* is an epic. *Pattu-p-Pattu* is a later Sangham anthology. Iyer undertook several journeys into the interior villages of Tamil Nadu in search of stray manuscripts that might be found in ancient houses to get at a definitive version.

During this period, some people who had been jealous of Iyer's growing fame wrote letters criticising *Jeevaka Chintāmani*. They wondered how a person who owed everything to a Saivite Mutt could associate himself with the publication of a Jain classic. Iyer wrote out a lengthy reply to such criticisms as also all that had been pointed out as mistakes in his edition. He showed his reply to his colleague, Sadhu Seshier. Iyer thought Seshier would be impressed and would help him publish the same. But Seshier tore it up. "Do not reply to such trivial criticism. That way only the critics will gain publicity. And your own work would suffer too", he advised Iyer.

Iyer spent long hours at night studying *Pattu-p-Pāttu*. With monetary help from friends, he proceeded to print it at a press in Madras. Though he had not got the full manuscript of *Pattu-p-Pāttu*, he had reconstructed the poems with the help of Nachchinarkiniyar's commentary. The press work took six months and was completed in June 1889.

Now he took up the edition of the immortal *Silappadhikāram*. He began collecting the manuscripts and did deep research with the help of Adiyarkku Nallar's commentary. However, the available commentary did not cover all the cantos. But a kind of glossary was available which enabled him to get at the significance of passages that had seemed obscure at first. During the summer holidays of 1891 he went in search of palm-leaf manuscripts of the epic in the Tirunelveli district. He could get only a couple of moth-eaten manuscripts. Writing out a definitive version, he proceeded with the printing. All his research work was done without prejudice to his heavy schedule as a

lecturer in the Kumbakonam College. Every minute of his leisure time was spent on the editing work, and his endeavours in this regard were truly Himalayan. Hence the sense of fulfilment that accompanied the completion of each work was very sweet indeed to Iyer's heart.

After *Silappadhikāram* came out, Iyer's attention turned towards other classics like *Manimēkalai* and *Puranānooru. Paranānooru* had an old commentary for the first 260 verses. But the later poems presented pockets of obscurity. By now Iyer had laved extensively in Sangham vocabulary and culture, and hence he was able to clarify most of the doubts himself. The printing of *Puranānooru* began in the January of 1893 at Madras. In September of that year, Iyer's father passed away. Before he could get over his personal bereavement, another esteemed friend, Poondi Aranganatha Mudaliyar died in December. All this disturbed Iyer's peace of mind. However, in September 1894, *Puranānooru* came out carrying precious historical documentation in its biographical and critical notes. Several scholars who have written significant treatises and research documents on the classical Tamil age were all inspired to do so only because of this edition of *Puranāmooru.*

Preparing a properly edited book from palm-leaf manuscripts is no easy task. These hand-written manuscripts came into being under different circumstances. For instance, a poet may be reciting and explaining his own poem to a group of students. The students would be taking down what he says, and while writing they may insert something unconnected, which the poet may have spoken just in passing. The copyist would write out the entire thing along with the original text and commentary. Naturally, the manuscripts would be marred by innumerable mistakes. It is also difficult to identify the verses that are given as examples in palm-leaf manuscripts.

As for old texts that have no commentary, they will be in a dilapidated condition with letters and words missing here and there or recurring at times. 'Place' (Tinai) will not be indicated for some verses. 'Theme' (Turai) will be missing for some. Some verses will have neither. The name of the poet may be missing for some lyrics. Some may have mutilated names. Two verses may be indicated by the same number. Or the same verse will occur in different numbers. Some lyrics may not have the

opening lines. some may be lacking the middle, and some others may not have the concluding portion. It is wrong to think that palm-leaf manuscripts are neat works that can be given for printing straightaway. There have been Editors who have been so confounded by palm-leaf manuscripts that they have given up their attempts in despair. Indeed, no one had been able so far to publish this particular classic, *Puranā-nooru*. They could not even get at the meaning of the verses. But God's grace and Iyer's immense scholarship and monumental patience have now gifted Tamil Nadu with these priceless treasures of ancient Tamil culture. The innumerable difficulties faced during the editing of the classic were forgotten when Iyer completed the task. Like a mother who thrills with pleasure at her newborn babe that she has given birth to after ten months of travail and the killer-pains of labour, Iyer was very happy when he saw the published volume of *Puranānooru*.

It was now time to take up *Manimēkalai*, a Buddhist epic. There had been Jain scholars in Tamil Nadu to clear the doubts regarding the Jain epic, *Jeevaka Chintāmani*. But there were no more any practising Buddhists. *Manimēkalai* is full of Buddhist theology. Hence several passages sounded obscure when Iyer read the poem. *Veeracholiam*, a work on grammar by a Buddhist, helped with some material regarding Buddhism. Malur Rangachariar, a Professor at Madras, had studied Buddhism well. Through him, Iyer was able to obtain numerous clarifications. He got several books on Buddhism and gave them to Malur Rangachariar who read the books and explained them in Tamil enabling Iyer to take down copious notes. In the meantime, Iyer managed to publish *Purapporul Venbā Mālai*.

Manimēkalai went to press in June 1896. All that Iyer had learnt about Buddhism formed a masterly introduction to the edition under the headings, 'Buddha', 'Buddha Dharma' and 'Buddha Sangha'. Glossary and alphabetical index were added too. The printing of *Manimēkalai* was completed in 1898. It contained comparative citations from 59 Tamil works and 29 Sanskrit classics. Difficult words had been given detailed explanations. A summary of the epic in prose was an additional help to the reader.

Iyer's attention was now on *Ainkuru-nooru*, *Patitru-p-pattu*, *Ahanānooru* and *Perunkathai*. *Ainkuru-nooru* is one of the *Ettu-*

tohai (Group of Eight) works. 500 brief lyrics divided into five sections each of 100, moving around the five major area-divisions in Tamil poetics, make up this unique anthology. *Patitru-p-pattu* describes the greatness of Chera kings. *Ahanānooru* is about love. *Perunkathai* retells the story of Udayana. Iyer was determined to publish them one after another, and therefore he dived deep into the necessary research about ancient Tamil history and culture.

8

Recognition

It was P. Panditurai Thevar, a scion of the royal family of Ramanathapuram, who helped Iyer publish *Manimēkalai* and *Purapporul Venbā Mālai*. Thevar started the Tamil Sangham at Madurai and published several important literary works. He was also instrumental in pubiishing the seminal Tamil magazine, *Sen Tamil*. Thevar's mother passed away in 1898. Iyer went to Ramanathapuram for offering his condolences. Panditurai Thevar's residence was called 'Soma Sundara Vilasam' and Iyer stayed here for a month. The two scholars met for long conversations in the mornings and evenings. Thevar told Iyer:

> You came for a formal condolence regarding my mother's death. Your company has chased away my sorrow. My mother was a noble lady. She was the cause of many good things that blessed me while she was alive. Even after death, she has made you come to me to bring me the joy of Tamil poesy.

One day Panditurai Thevar went to see the King, Bhaskara Setupati. When leaving, Setupati made an important announcement to him. Panditurai Thevar concurred with it as a most proper gesture and went straight to Iyer. Iyer welcomed him. "I have brought you a very happy news". said Thevar. "Why, do you want me to edit any new book?" Iyer asked.

"Not one, but now you can undertake to publish as many books as you want. The king is planning to gift a village to you which would bring you a lot of money. Today I had been to the palace. Bhaskara Setupati gave me the happy news", explained Thevar. "He feels he has been too indifferent and has

not helped you in a substantial manner. Hence he is going to gift a village in his zamin to you. He asked me to convey this news to you."

However, Iyer's countenance recorded no excited joy at the prospects of a financial windfall. The savant merely said: "This gesture makes me realise the great affection the king has for me. I shall speak to him in person", was all that he said.

When Iyer went to see Bhaskara Setupati, the king thought that he had come to express his gratitude. Iyer did not speak about it first. A little later he said gently:

> Panditurai Thevar gave me your message. I realise what deep affection and faith you have for me. At present I lack nothing. By God's grace, the college pays me my salary. I have learnt to lead a frugal life. Do not think I am rejecting your gift. I know the problems of this principality. My heart refuses to accept such a generous gift in the present state of affairs.

At that time the principality was indeed going through a financially bad time. The Raja realised the import of Iyer's words and was silent for a while. Then he said, "let it be as you wish", and bade him farewell. At no time did Iyer regret that he had missed the opportunity of owning a village.

At this time V. Nagoji Rao was the principal of Kumbakonam College. He was an expert in music who wished to publish some books on the subject. He sought Iyer's help to edit them. Iyer obliged readily. Nagoji Rao wished to help Iyer in some manner and said:

> You are publishing ancient Tamil classics. I know that you get no monetary advantage by this work. If your income can be increased, it would help you in your publication work as well. Nowadays the lessons prescribed for schools are not published well. It would be good if you could undertake to write them. Longman's Publishing Company are willing to publish if you would write books for study from third class to third form. They will pay you well and the royalties can be used for your services to Tamil.

Iyer mused for a while and then spoke softly:

I am grateful for your affection. It is a comfort to me that you understand my problems. Other friends too have asked me to write text-books. But money is not important for me. All my time is spent in teaching Tamil and doing research in Tamil classics. If money begins to flow in, my mind may lose its concentration due to other desires. I would then have no time for research for publishing ancient Tamil classics. Do not think that I am rejecting your suggestion. Just leave me to my ways.

Nagoji Rao wondered how Iyer could reject a good income but admired his colleague's love for Tamil literature.

One of the important events of 1898 was the visit of Lord Havelock to the Kumbakonam College In those days English reigned supreme. Almost everyone thought that the proper manner of welcome to be presented to the Governor of Madras could only be in English. But Nagoji Rao knew Iyer very well. He requested Iyer to read out a welcome in Tamil. When the Governor visited the college, several important persons were present. Iyer read out the verses of welcome composed by him. The audience praised the welcome as worthy of the Governor's position. The Governor was photographed along with Iyer.

The task of editing ancient Tamil manuscripts brought its own budget of irritations as well. Strangers who know about Iyer and his life's mission would write to him about the manuscripts in their possession. They would ask for money to send the manuscripts to him. Since Iyer always hoped to come across unexpected treasures, he would send the money. Often the money would be wasted.

At one time a scholar wrote to him that he had a copy of the *Sāpa Purāna* with him. Iyer sent him some money. When the manuscript reached Iyer, he found that it was only *Sarabha Purāna*. The work is an account of Siva incarnating as Sarabha Murti and not an exotic classic. All the same Iyer felt that the money sent for postage was no waste, as he had been enabled to read again a holy book!

The Madurai Tamil Sangham was inaugurated in 1901. From then on, regular annual celebrations began to be held. Iyer would accept Panditurai Thevar's invitation every year

and attend the annual celebrations. Invariably he would be called upon to preside over the poets' meet on the second day. This went on for several years.

Some enthusiasts came together in 1900 and started the 'Dravida Basha Sangham' at Madras. Seshadri Achar of the Education Department and Fr. J. Lorres were the secretaries of the society. Iyer was made an Honorary Member.

Iyer's fame as a teacher and scholar had now spread far and wide. It was felt in the educational circles that he should be brought to Madras. Seshadri Achar came to Kumbakonam and sounded Iyer about this.

"How can I come to Madras? My job is here", Iyer said.

"If you are willing, I will make arrangements for your transfer to the Presidency College. I know everyone in the Education Department All that I need is your approval", Achar said.

At that time an aged gentleman was the Tamil pundit at Madras Presidency College. Madras was his native place. Though the move to Madras would help him in expediting the printing work, Iyer did not accept the transfer as it would inconvenience the old gentleman. So he politely refused the offer.

During the summer holidays of 1902, a student of Julien Vinson of Paris came to Madras. Julian Vinson and Iyer had been correspondents for a long time.

When Vinson's student came, Lionel Bybert was the sub-collector at Thanjavur. The Frenchman was the guest of Bybert. He told the sub-collector that Vinson spoke often about Iyer and his services to the cause of Tamil letters.

The Frenchman requested Iyer to give him some work to read when he would be travelling to Pondicherry, Karaikal and other places, and that he would return it carefully. Iyer gave him the paper manuscript of the old *Kanchi Purāna.* The Frenchman was immensely pleased to read the work. He returned the manuscript by registered post after a fortnight.

This French lover of Tamil literature spoke often to the sub-collector about the problems of collecting ancient manuscripts and publishing them, and how Iyer had raised the stature of Tamil throughout the world. These words of appreciation had a good result soon after. When the coronation of Edward

VII was celebrated in January 1903, a public meeting was held in Thanjavur. Iyer also received an invitation. At the meeting, the sub-collector presented Iyer with a Scroll of Honour in recognition of his unique services to Tamil letters.

Iyer now turned his attention to research in *Ainkuru-nooru*, one of the Sangham classics. He received a letter from Jaffna which advised him to bring out only a brief edition so that he could publish many more books. Hence Iyer published a shortened edition of *Ainkuru-nooru* in 1902. After the book came out, the friend wrote again: "I didn't know you would make your notes so brief. Tamil literature has lost a great treasure this way. I am sorry for having been the cause." June 1903 saw the publication of a fuller edition of the classic. He dedicated the work to Tyagaraja Chettiar as a token of gratitude.

9

At Madras

Srinivasachariar who was the Tamil pundit at the Madras Presidency College retired in the summer of 1903. At that time Iyer was engaged in research on *Paditru-p-pattu*. One day, the college Principal, J.M. Hensman, came to see Iyer in his house. He spoke to Iyer of a letter from the Director of Education which informed him that Iyer had been transferred to the Presidency College. The letter also sought advice regarding Iyer's successor at Kumbakonam College.

Iyer was of course pleased at this widening of horizons in his teaching career and attributed it to divine Grace. But it was not easy to reconcile himself to leaving a city in which he had lived for 23 years, and part from his friends of long standing. It was also a matter for regret that he would not be able to go to Tiruavaduturai often and converse with the Head of the Mutt. However, Hensman advised him to go:

> In Madras your publication work would receive a lot of help. It would be easier to look after the printing there than by your commuting from here frequently on this work.

Sri Ambalavana Desikar, now the pontiff of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt, was very happy at the elevation in Iyer's professional status. "Your going to Madras carries many advantages. The fame of our Mutt would also spread there because of your close association with us. In every way this transfer is a good thing", he assured Iyer.

Iyer reached Madras on an auspicious day. He stayed at the house of his uncle in Tiruvatteswaranpet and joined duty in the Presidency College.

The Kumbakonam College had furnished the Tamil classroom well with a high platform, a good table and a solid chair. But in Madras the classroom did not possess such advantages and was not on par with the rooms used for the English medium. There was just an old table. Iyer mentioned this gently to the Principal, Mr. Bilderbeck. At once the Principal made arrangements for a good platform, table, chair and a bureau.

Iyer settled down in a rented house in the Pillayar Koil Street, Tiruvatteeswaranpet, in January 1904. In June, *Paditrup-pattu* was published.

Iyer's mother, Saraswati Ammal, passed away in the beginning of 1905. Sri Srinivasa Iyengar came to Iyer to convey his condolences. Incidentally he said that arrangements had been made to prescribe Iyer's summary of *Manimēkalai* for the M.A. students. The income came handy for the religious ceremonies.

Quite early in his Presidency College days Iyer became a favourite with his students because of his sincerity, hard work and a gentle sense of humour. This gave cause for jealousy and a few colleagues of his sought to incite some short-sighted students to create trouble in Iyer's class. They even published a pamphlet which said: "Nachchinarkiniyar (the great commentator of *Jeevaka Chintāmani*) committed mistakes: so did Sankaracharya: and now U.V. Swaminatha Iyer is following suit". One of Iyer's students brought the pamphlet to him in great anguish. But Iyer was neither angry nor sad when he read it. He smiled. "Have they raised poor me to such a great height? They have placed me on a par with Sankara and Nachchinarkiniyar!" Even the students saw the piquancy of it and had a hearty laugh.

Iyer was, of course, not a mere research-machine. For him life and literature formed a single fabric and the one helped the other grow wings. He had monumental patience when dealing with common people and always used the opportunities that came his way to explicate the glory of the Indian literary and religious tradition. One of the revealing incidents in his life relates to a police official who was his neighbour. Somebody went to the official and enthusiastically recited selections from *Kāvadi-chintu* and *Tiruppugazh*. Jay Singh, the official, was outraged by the romantic descriptions of women in the passages.

He remarked that children are led into wrong paths by such Tamil songs and these so-called literary effusions should be banned from circulation. On hearing this, Iyer went to see Jay Singh.

"Welcome! An unexpected pleasure!" said the official and offered him a seat.

"I heard that you are a very sincere person. It gratifies me to know that you are keen on putting an end to erotica. Only those who have a true knowledge of our culture would feel like it. But of course, literature has to be viewed from a different angle. Since the Sangham Age, such descriptions have been favoured by poets. In their verse form one absorbs only the literary grace and will not be aware of anything low".

The official was pleased. "Some poets do write irresponsibly and disturb juvenile minds in an undesirable manner. It would help me if you could advise me as to how to stop the spread of such literature".

"I have come to discuss that point. Have you some time to spare?" Iyer asked.

"You are such a great and well-known man. How can I have work which is more important than listening to you", the police official said humbly.

"Some scholars told me that you are an enemy of Tamil. I told them it was a far-fetched conclusion. I believe you expressed a wish to cast in flames all literature. I am sure they have misunderstood you. I have come therefore to talk to you in person."

"May be they are angry with me. I do feel that we should not popularise poems like *Kāvadi-chintu* and *Tiruppugazh* that describe women in an explicit manner".

"It is true these works contain descriptions of women. But that is not the only aspect and we should not be content with reading only these select portions. If you read the poems in entirety, you will know that the author's argument only criticises such pornographic thoughts. Sringara is one of the nine rasas. Sanskrit works too indulge in that rasa. No literature can survive without description of women. I have published the Sangham classics which are very ancient pieces of writing. That is why the

Tamil people hold me in good respect. The Sangham classics contain descriptions of women. One thinks only of the literary beauty and contextual appositeness when reading them. I am told you want to burn the entire lot! Well, the same is the case with Sanskrit classics. If you go about destroying literature in this manner, we will have nothing left of Sanskrit or Tamil literature".

"From what you say, all books appear to be pornographic!" exclaimed the official.

Iyer said: "Pornography is different from emotional enjoyment. Love is an important emotion in the life of man. Epics and puranas speak of love. The Alwars and Nayanmars have put themselves in the place of the beloved and sung of God as their lover. Sringara will be in their hymns too."

"Is that so? Do *Thevdram* and *Tiruvāchakam* also contain Sringara?" asked Singh, all astonishment.

"Ah, yes, it can be found in our devotional scriptures including the *Divya prabhadham*. Devotion to the Lord has been sung in terms of love, the Nayaka-Nayaki *bhāva*. The ethos of Indian literature is linked with the sensuous description of the human heart and body. One cannot reject them as pornography", said Iyer.

"All this is new to me", the official murmured.

"You may not have had leisure to go into the philosophy of Indian aesthetics. Well, in the villages, women do not wear blouses. Vegetable vendors, curd sellers and others go about with nonchalant ease, clad only in a sari. But there seems nothing wrong with their dress. Debasement lies in the eye of the beholder".

"What you say is true".

"Another thing. You go to the temples".

"Yes, of course".

"Have you seen the idols there, and the statues on the spires? Though the female anatomy is emphasised, no one is struck by low thoughts. The child which is playing on the breast of his mother is a stranger to such feelings. This is not a new tradition. Indian culture has been reared upon a proper insight into the workings of human love and aspiration for the divine. Instead, if we cavil at some stray

descriptions, we will have to dump the whole of Sanskrit and Tamil literatures into the sea. And the idols and statues in temples will have to be smashed up."

"Oh, Sir, please do not say such things. Lack of knowledge misled me. You have dispelled my ignorance, and made me see the truth. I am grateful", said Jay Singh. From then on he gave up his talk of destroying Indian literature.

One of the important publications during these years was Iyer's edition of Mahavidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai's translation of *Tyagarāja Leela*. The divine play of Tyagaraja, the presiding deity of Tiruvarur, is said to have been recorded as 360 episodes. Pillai had wished to translate all of them, but could only translate fourteen episodes. These Tamil verses of Pillai were now made available in print by Iyer.

New Year's Day, 1906. This was the season of titles awarded by the Government to leaders from all walks of life. A friend of Iyer, Gangadhara Sastrigal, came to him in the morning all excitement. "We are delighted. All of us are overwhelmed by joy." Iyer did not understand. Sastrigal was surprised. "You have been awarded the title of Mahamahopadhyaya." This was welcome news.

Letters of congratulations poured in. Justice Mani Iyer wrote: "I am very happy to know of your being honoured with the Mahamahopadhyaya title. I knew that you would get it."

Till this year the title had been reserved only for Sanskrit scholars. By awarding it to a Tamil scholar for the first time, the Government had indeed honoured itself.

In the same year the Prince and Princess of Wales visited Madras. The city wore a festive look as zamindars and Rajahs converged upon it. A durbar was held at the Governor's residence. Previously, a part of Madras with a predominant Indian population used to be called 'Black Town' by the Englishmen. This was an irritation to the local populace. The coming of the Prince was made the occasion to rename it as George Town. Several scholars were given titles and awards at the function. Iyer was honoured with a golden bracelet.

During this year, a grand public meeting was held at the Madras Presidency College to felicitate Iyer on being honoured

with the title, Mahamahopadhyaya. Subramania Bharati, the great Tamil poet, attended the meeting. He was then the assistant editor of *Swadesa Mithran*. He read out three verses composed by him for the occasion. In fact, the verses had issued forth from him with spontaneous grace even as the meeting was in progress:

Who would jump in joy
That the Sun has gained brightness;
That honey has sweetness;
That gods are immortal.
Why this excitement
That the fame of Swaminatha,
Agasthya-incarnate,
Has been honoured today?

If foreigners who know not
Tamil's greatness, rulers though they be,
Have kindly awarded
The Mahamahopadhyaya title
And sounded the fame
of Kumbakonam Swaminatha,
Imagine the honours to this scholar
If he had lived during Pandya royalty!

O scholar from Kumbakonam,
Do not feel sad that you are a stranger
To wealth and the ways
Of daily ease brought by it;
As long as Tamil lives
You will know the praise of poets,
The gratitude of their hearts,
And shine immortal.

10

Austere Life, Rich in Scholarship

Subramania Bharati had rightly pointed out the frugal life led by Iyer who spent his time and money lavishly in the cause of Tamil literary research. However, discerning friends and relations honoured him greatly for his simple living and enormous scholarship. An incident relating to the rented house in which he lived may be recalled here.

A colleague of Iyer once wanted him to correct a book he had prepared for students. As Iyer had no time, he asked his son to help the friend. The friend used to visit him now then, and once during a casual conversation Iyer mentioned the rent of the house. The friend went to the owner and asked him why he had agreed to take such a small sum as the rent for the house, The houseowner had great regard for Iyer. The gentleman's words made him angry:

> "Maybe it is a mistake to take even these twenty rupees. I should perhaps pay him twenty for staying in my house. He is a great man. Because of his residence, my house is like a temple. Many scholars and famous personalities come to see him here. Unless he himself goes away, I shall never ask him to shift and thus lose my good fortune."

The teacher, however, could not take the hint and pestered the houseowner to sell the house for a good price. To put an end to the nuisance, the houseowner went to Iyer and asked him whether he would himself like to buy the house. Iyer had a house of his own at Kumbakonam. He had no plans nor the funds to buy a house at Madras. He declined the offer with thanks.

Within a year, the teacher who had initiated the mischief got the houseowner to arrange for selling the house for Rs. 4500. When Iyer learnt of it, he was much perturbed. It would be no easy task to transfer the books and manuscripts from the house to a new place. And would any new house be as congenial for his work? As he sat musing on his pial one day, an accountant known to the houseowner walked by. Iyer called him and said:

> "It seems your friend has received an advance for selling this house. Would I not have bought it, if I had been told about it?"
>
> "I believe he told you last year. Since you were reluctant to buy it, he thought you were building a big house somewhere else", the accountant said.
>
> "It never struck me then. But I would like to buy the house now. I shall give one hundred more than that promised by the other party. Somehow get this house for me. I shall also help you."

The accountant returned the same evening. "I bring good news. The houseowner has returned the advance. He has agreed to sell this house to you", he said.

Iyer was delighted. He never thought that the deal would go through so easily. After one month Iyer paid the money and bought the house. In memory of Tyagaraja Chettiar who had helped him in getting a job in the Kumbakonam College, Iyer named the house 'Tyagaraja Vilasam.' Associated with the names of two great Tamil savants, the house is held in reverence by lovers of Tamil today.

Iyer's publication work proceeded apace. July 1906 saw the publication of Vembatturar's *Tiruvilayādal Purānam* with glossary and research notes. Panditurai Thevar gave monetary help towards the publication. He also requested Iyer to contribute regularly to *Sen Tamil*, the research publication of Madurai Tamil Sangham. Iyer was reluctant as he had plenty of work on hand. But Panditurai Thevar assured Iyer that his writings alone would lend the magazine the needed prestige. Therefore Iyer decided to publish as a serial in the issues of *Sen Tamil* one of the works that he was critically analysing. The chosen literary masterpiece was *Tiruvārūr Ula*.

Among other publications he brought out were Meenakshisundaram Pillai's *Thaniur Purānam* and *Manni Padikarai Purānam.* The second edition of *Jeevaka Chintāmani* appeared in December 1907, with a good deal of additional matter.

The work of Iyer penetrated through the most unexpected areas. For instance, he received a letter in 1908, but the envelope had been censored by prison authorities. Wondering who could have tried to communicate with him from a prison, Iyer opened the letter.

V. O. Chidambaram Pillai, the pioneering shipowner of South India and sterling patriot, was then in Coimbatore jail. He had written that letter giving details of his *Tirukkural* studies and how he was trying to bring out an English translation of this Tamil classic. He had asked for some clarifications. Iyer readily obliged.

During this busy career of editing and publishing books, Iyer's most difficult experiences were always connected with printing presses. Not one press gave him complete satisfaction. Coming to know of this, Ambalavana Desikar, the Head of Tiruavaduturai Mutt, wished to help him. He thought it would be better if Iyer had a printing press of his own. When Iyer was on a visit to Tiruavaduturai, he broached the subject.

> You are experiencing a lot of difficulty in getting the books printed. If you have a press of your own, it would speed up your timetable and enable you to publish books in time. I shall give you 5000 rupees. If you buy a press with it, you can publish as many books as you wish to in quick succession.

Iyer did not reply immediately. After thinking over it for a day he spoke to Desikar.

> "I realise the great love your Holiness has for me. It is true that I am put to a lot of inconvenience by the various presses. However, this leaves me to worry only about paper and the material for binding. If I have a press I will have to worry about its management, paying the workers and so on. It might cut upon my time for research. Your Holiness must forgive me for not acceding to the proposal."

The Pontiff agreed and did not insist further.

Iyer was not a mere arm-chair scholar. He travelled widely and made personal studies of places which had legendary, historical and literary importance. Thus he was indeed a walking encyclopaedia of South Indian culture. When Lord Carmichael, Governor of Madras, was to visit the Department of Archaeology, the Head of the Department was worried as there were several rare idols and other artifacts which would have to be explained to the visiting dignitary. He went to Iyer and requested him to come over and help him. Iyer agreed and was present during the Governor's visit. He patiently explained the salient points regarding the historicity and traditional significance of the statues to the Governor and his wife. His explanations were translated into English for the visitors. The Governor felt very happy.

When he was about to be photographed, the Governor looked around for the 'pundit' who had offered such beautiful and meaningful explanations and insisted upon Iyer sitting near him for the photograph. Indeed, Iyer's genius for communication transcended the barriers of language and race.

During 1912, M. R. N. Ramanathan Chettiar and his brothers performed the *kumbhabhishekam* of the Sri Kalahasti temple in a grand manner. The Chettiar brothers wished to publish a new book on the holy temple to mark the event. By a fortuitous circumstance, Iyer was preparing the *Tirukālathi Purānam* for publication. So he felt it would be appropriate to publish the same. Iyer's compilation of the views on the devotee Kannappa available in Tamil literature makes this publication a piece of rare scholarship. Iyer attended the *kumbhabhishekam* and released the book.

February 1915 was the sixtieth birthday of Iyer, His friends wished to celebrate it in a grand manner. But Iyer did not wish to go through any pompous festivity. Instead he spent a few quiet days in Sri Kalahasti and had darshan of the Lord. Two years later, his wife passed away.

The concluding years of his Presidency College career were marked by an ever-widening arc of research activities. He published a fine edition of the Sangham classic, *Paripādal*. In spite of his untiring search, Iyer could not get the complete work which seems to have been an anthology of seventy poems,

as we learn from Parimelalakar's commentary. The extant 22 poems give us a fine glimpse of certain social and religious customs of the Sangham age, and an idea of the deities worshipped by the ancient Tamils.

Iyer's scholarship was no more confined to the land of the Tamils. The 'Bharat Dharma Maha Mandal' of Benaras learnt about his services to the cause of Indian culture and awarded him the title, 'Dravida Vidya Bhushanam'.

11

Retirement

Iyer retired from the Madras Presidency College in 1919. Authorities higher-up wanted him to continue for some more years but he declined the offer with thanks. While taking leave of the Principal, Iyer hoped that his successor would be chosen with care so as to take the Tamil Department to greater heights of achievement. The Principal asked for his suggestion. Iyer mentioned E. V. Anantharama Iyer who was appointed as his successor.

When Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate, visited Madras in April 1919, Iyer met him in the house of T.S. Ramaswami Iyer. Tagore was told about Iyer's literary achievements in detail. The great poet was astonished to see the books published by Iyer, for these were indeed models of editorial perfection. "How did you manage to do all this?" Tagore asked. Iyer spoke to him of his travels in remote and interior villages in search of palm-leaf manuscripts, how he laboriously copied them on paper, collated various available scripts and edited them. Tagore was lost in wonderment and expressed a wish to visit Iyer's place of work. The same evening he visited 'Tyagaraja Vilsam', saw the neatly stacked bunches of palm-leaf manuscripts and paper copies and gave expression to his warm appreciation. Iyer showed Tagore how to write on palm leaves. This was indeed an event for the whole Tiruvatteeswaranpet area! Even those who did not know Iyer previously, now bowed to him in reverence when they met him on the road.

Growing old brought its share of responsibilities to Iyer who was essentially a reader and a writer. His help was sought for in resolving family problems and the disputes of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt. When Ambalavana Desikar of Tiruava-

duturai passed away in 1920, Vaidyanatha Tampiran who had been Manager till then became now the pontiff. Some people went to court challenging his authority. The pontiff requested Iyer to stay with him for a while till the dispute was sorted out. Accordingly, Iyer spent two years in the temple town. He did not remain idle though. All the palm-leaf manuscripts and books of the Mutt were arranged by him as a regular library and these were kept in an orderly manner. He began a school where he also taught. Visitors to the Mutt were happy to see the savant teaching at the school, bringing back old memories when Meenakshisundaram Pillai reigned here as the Laureate.

The Prince of Wales visited Madras in January 1922. The Government wished to honour Tamil and Sanskrit scholars on the occasion. Iyer came to Madras and received a *khillat* in person. At Tiruvaduturai, the new pontiff became ill and passed away suddenly. Vaidyalinga Desikar succeeded him. As his research work proceeded tardily at Tiruavaduturai, Iyer returned to Madras.

At Madras he immediately plunged into the work on *Perunkathai*. This was one of the precious palm-leaf manuscripts rescued by Iyer from oblivion. It is also known as *Konguvel Mākkathai*. In spite of Iyer's concerted efforts spread over five years, he could not get a complete manuscript. He decided to publish what he had, an epic with the beginning and the conclusion missing. He requested Sanskrit scholars to study the *Brihad-Samhita*, and with the ideas and information thus gleaned from the Sanskrit original, prepared a detailed edition. The book was published in 1924 and was immediately pronounced a scholar's delight. Iyer had by now become a living legend indeed.

As the Tamil literary world woke up to its great heritage, the departments of Tamil in various colleges began to acquire a higher status. Raja Annamalai Chettiar came forward to establish colleges for Tamil and Sanskrit studies in Chidamabaram. He thought of Iyer as the right person to head the Tamil institution. A few people were sent as emissaries to persuade Iyer to accept the assignment. Annamalai Chettiar himself visited Iyer in this connexion. Ultimately Iyer accepted the offer mainly because this would enable him to have daily darshan of Nataraja in the famous temple. The Dikshitars, the hereditary

trustees of the temple, were particularly happy about his coming, for Iyer was not only a great scholar but a deep devotee of Saivism.

Iyer reached Chidamabaram in July 1924. Arrangements had been made for his comfortable stay and the Meenakshi Tamil College was inaugurated at his residence. Neelakanta Sastri, Principal of the Meenakshi Arts College, gave the necessary help to Iyer.

The Madurai Tamil Sangham celebrated its 24th annual day on 8 June 1925. C.P. Ramaswami Iyer presided over the celebrations. Iyer went in advance to take part in the deliberations, in response to the invitation of the organisers.

Iyer's presence was always a tonic to Tamil lovers, and now he was at the apex of his fame. During the Tamil Sangham festivities a purse was presented on behalf of the public to Iyer. At the same time, the Sankaracharya of Kamakoti Peetham sent Iyer two shawls, a bracelet and the title 'Dakshināthya Kālanidhi'. Iyer has mentioned the name of all contributors to the purse presented to him at Madura in the introduction to his edition of Sankara Namachivayar's commentary on *Nannool*, as the money came in time to facilitate the publication of the book.

The strenuous work as Principal of a newly-established College did not prevent Iyer from continuing with his Tamil research. During his Chidambaram stay, he began preparing an edition of *Takka Yāga Parani* along with its rich commentary. Such a heavy schedule told upon his health, and Iyer began to suffer from frequent bouts of pain in the stomach and consequent indigestion. Hence he requested Annamalai Chettiar to relieve him of the principalship. Chettiar agreed and on the advice of Iyer appointed his colleague, Ponnoduvar, as his successor.

Now I* come to an important point in my own life, when the divine grace brought me into contact with Iyer. I was teaching Tamil in Sendamangalam village. A monk, Nijananda Saraswati, noticed my attempts at writing Tamil poetry and suggested I should go to Iyer for further training in Tamil classics. Airavatha Mudaliyar, the Mirasdar of Sendamangalam, also

*K. V. Jagannathan, author of this monograph in Tamil.

said so and took me to Vadalur for the Thai Poosam celebrations. From there we went to Chidambaram and met Iyer.

In those days I did not wear a shirt. I had a necklace of rudraksha beads and my forehead was smeared with holy ash. Iyer was struck by my appearance and looked upon me with love. My well-wishers who had accompanied me told him of my love for Tamil and my desire to improve my Tamil knowledge.

Iyer began to reminisce about his legendary teacher and of the many students who left Meenakhisundaram Pillai half-way through their studies. "I am now leaving this college to go to Madras. Would you like to study in the college? Or would you rather come with me to Madras?" he asked. I said that I wished to study under his personal supervision.

He then asked me to recite a verse I chose one from Kamban's *Ramayanam*. I answered his questions to the best of my ability. He must have felt happy, for he immediately permitted me to come to Madras and study under him provided I could make arrangements for my board in the city. Iyer too returned to Madras in March 1927. He was given an affectionate farewell by the people of Chidambaram.

Back in Madras, Iyer received an invitation to speak in the University for ten days on ancient Tamil classics. For five days each in the months of November and December, Iyer lectured in the University Senate Hall. The University paid an honorarium of Rs. 500 for the lectures. Iyer who had till then been working for long hours in kerosene light, arranged for the electrification of Tyagaraja Vilasam. Appropriately, the electric supply come to the house on the day of Kartik, festival of lights.

When I began to study under him, Iyer was not keeping good health. Hence he had taken leave of his editorial labours for a while. He began to teach me the *Tiruvilayādal Purānam*, and would cover almost 300 verses daily. While teaching me, he would patiently point out to me the subtle beauties embedded in the verses and also rare facts regarding literary and legendary traditions. Often he would recount to me his days with Pillai and the Mahavidwan's creative energy. I was deeply moved by the loving regard Iyer had even in that advanced age for Pillai who had known almost nothing about the Sangham classics. Iyer was truely the father of Tamil renaissance through his editions of the Sangham works, but he never felt superior

to Pillai. There is indeed nothing to compare with the loving devotion Iyer had for his dear master.

This devotion for his master and his own religious bent of mind kept Iyer in close touch with the Saivite Mutts of his day. When the *kumbhabhishekam* of Mayuranathar was performed, the Head of the Tiruavaduturai Mutt wished to print the invitation in a proper manner and sought the help of Iyer. Iyer published *Mayilai Tiripanthāthi* which concerns this presiding deity of Mayuram. Though a small volume, it is adorned with a fine introduction from Iyer's pen.

At Tiruppanandal, Kasivasi Chokkalinga Tampiran was the Head of the Kasi Mutt. His deputy was Swaminatha Tampiran. A scholar, he was a descendent of Kottayur Sivakolundu Desikar. When he came down to Chetput Iyer went to see him and they conversed for a while about Sivakolundu Desikar's poetry. On the Tampiran's request, Iyer ageed to bring out an edition of the poems.

One of the finest discoveries of Iyer for posterity is the minor Tamil classic, *Tamil Vidu Thoothu*, a poem that describes the greatness of Tamil with emotional fervour. There is a passage in the poem which deals with the several types of lamps used by the Tamils down the centuries. When he attended the *kumbhabhishekam* at Mayuram, Iyer gathered the needed information about the exotic designs of lamps from the temple priests. He was particularly pleased with two lines in the poem which became his mantra of literary idealism.

> I decided to live because of you, O Tamil !
> Even heavenly nectar I reject !

Kachiappa Munivar, author of *Tiruttanigai Purānam* and *Kanda Purānam*, was a sublime poet. He was a disciple of Sivagnana Munivar. Meenakshisundaram Pillai had unbounded regard for him. Iyer prepared an edition of that poet's *Kachi Ānanda Rudrēsa Vandu Vidu Thoothu*. He also published the much-awaited *Thakka Yāga Parani* in 1930 and made it a treasure-trove of scholarship. The book remains unsurpassed till today in the matter of exegetic brilliance.

As 1930 came to an end, Iyer had an accident. He slipped when coming down the stairs and hurt his foot badly. A

neighbourhood doctor treated him without any appreciable success. The renowned surgeon, Dr. Rangachari, was called and he operated upon Iyer at home. Iyer had to be confined to bed for quite some time. The doctor had asked Iyer not to strain himself by reading and writing. This was a sore trial to one whose very life-breath was Tamil poetry. I was staying with him. As soon as Iyer's son left for the High Court where he worked, my teacher would ask me to read aloud Tamil poetry. His mind, however, was not at rest. Iyer had collected a lot of material about Pillai's life and had planned to write his biography. In fact he had written out the earlier sections. Only a portion towards the end remained incomplete. Iyer was haunted by the thought that he might pass away before completing the biography of his beloved master.

One day he ordered me to bring to him "that bundle". I protested reminding him about the surgeon's strict instructions. "What does the doctor know? If I do my duty, God will guard me", was all that Iyer said. I brought the bundle and opened it. He began to dictate the events connected with the last days of Pillai. As he spoke with tears streaming down his eyes, I wrote down with my eyes wet all the time. The biography of Meenakshisundaram Pillai was completed and published in two parts.

The Madras University conferred an Honorary Doctorate on Iyer at the convocation held in August, 1932. A doctoral robe had to be worn at the time of receiving the degree. P. S. Sivasawami Iyer who was also to receive the honour at the same convocation arranged for a formal dress to be stitched for Iyer. Accepting the signal honour, Iyer made a brief speech in the course of which he said:

> My regards to the Honourable Chancellor of the Madras University. In this centre of all arts where great people from different walks of life are assembled, I feel it a great honour to receive this degree from your person. My hearty thanks for your words of praise and for those who have been instrumental in awarding me this honour. Though I do not deserve the degree, my heart tells me this is an honour done to Tamil letters.

The Editor of *Sivanesan* who was reading Iyer's serialisation of several minor classics in *Sen Tamil* requested the scholar to contribute to his magazine as well. Iyer agreed. *Palamalai Kōvai* and *Tirumayilai Yamaka Antāti* were some of the works that were published in that journal.

Another journal that came to be associated with Iyer's scholarship was *Kalaimagal* started by Sri Narayanaswami Iyer, the proprietor of the *Madras Law Journal.* Before launching the magazine, he requested Iyer to write an article for the opening issue Iyer responded at once with a brilliant essay, 'Kalaigal', which associated the name of Kalaimagal (Goddess of Learning) with the arts (Kalaigal). He pointed out that the ancient Tamils had given seminal importance to music and drama. Painting and sculpture had reached heights of excellence as can be known from works like *Manimēkalai* and *Perunkathai.* Life for the ancient Tamils was linked with artistic imagination at every level, be it weaving, stringing flowers, cooking, astrology, astronomy, medicines, architecture, shipping or war. Oratory was cultivated according to the rules of 'Katturai Vagai' and there were of course treatises on the science of training elephants and horses. However, Iyer was not lost merely in reminiscential glory. He was concerned with the expanding knowledge of the modern world and wished his motherland to reap the benefit of new discoveries and inventions, and made a strong plea for translations from foreign languages into Tamil of important treatises. After all, the ancient Tamils had done precisely the same thing when they translated into Tamil several Sanskrit works of literary and scientific importance.

The journal carried in each issue important articles from Iyer's pen. He serialised the lives of poets and composers which were subsequently published as supplements to the journal. No wonder, then, that the editorial of the special issue of *Kalaimagal* in honour of Iyer on his eightieth birthday referred to him as the 'foster mother of *Kalaimagal.*' As another journal, *Danavanikan*, put it:

> The great scholar Swaminatha Iyer is writing in simple Tamil the biographies of several great men lost in obscurity till now. He has proved that if traditional scholars make an

attempt, they can certainly write simply and effectively. Iyer's style has an individuality of its own. Simple and appropriate words; limpid but powerful style; simple, sweet descriptions; humour and emotional identification with the subject on hand; such are the outstanding qualities of the great scholar's style. Each issue of *Kalaimagal* opens with a rare scene invoked by his genius.

Iyer also found immense gratification when he was able to publish the two parts of his biography of Pillai. *Mahavidwan Meenakshisundarma Pillai Avargal Charithram* is a pathfinder, an epic in prose, a classic for all times.

12

Iyer is Eighty

It had been rather a sore point with Iyer's admirers that he had not allowed them to celebrate his sixtieth birthday in a proper manner. They formed a celebration committee under the presidentship of Sri P.T. Rajan to celebrate Iyer's eightieth birthday in a grand manner. A public meeting was held at the University Senate Hall under the chairmanship of Sir Mohamed Usman. The felicitation address referred to Iyer's pioneering work in unearthing Tamil classics which had led to a re-writing of the history of Tamil Nadu. A purse for Rs. 3,001 as well as several addresses from leading literary associations of Madras were presented to the grand old man of Tamil letters. Iyer's reply was all humility as he accepted the good wishes and presents as the grace of Mother Tamil:

> My heart is now overwhelmed by an ocean of joy. I am reminded of Sekkizhar's description of the divine vision: "I have no words to describe it, ah! bless the vision that has appeared before me"! I feel young once again. I am now revitalised by the hope of continued patronage from the Tamil public for my future research work in Tamil.

A portrait of Iyer was unveiled by Sir Mohamed Usman and was received by the Vice-Chancellor, Mr. Littlehailes, on behalf of the University. The Special Swaminatha Iyer Eightieth Birthday Issue of *Kalaimagal* was released and the function concluded with Harikesavanallur Muthaiah Bhagavathar's musical recital of Tamil compositions. Iyer's birthday was celebrated in all the major towns of Tamil Nadu and even in distant Rangoon and Jaffna.

Age did not deter Iyer from continuing with his research and journalism. Scholar and layman alike were charmed by his Tamil style and narrative brilliance. There was the essay, 'Beggar's Song', in an issue of *Kalaimagal*. After reading the essay, Rajaji wrote to Iyer on 22 May 1937:

> Greetings. Often I miss reading the *Kalaimagal* issues. In between my problems, occasionally I do have the luck of coming across stray issues. It was thus I chanced upon your 'Beggar's Song'. Overwhelmed with joy, I hasten to write this letter. You could have titled it, 'Will it Burn the Village?' If I had authored this jewel of an essay, that would have been my choice as a title. What a lovely story! What wonderful *rasa*!—Rajagopalachari.

The 1937 Conference of the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishat was held at Madras. Mahatma Gandhi persided over it. The organisers were worried about the choice to head the committee of hosts. They decided upon Iyer and requested him to deliver the welcome address. Iyer's address turned out to be a masterly account of the greatness of the Tamils and their culture as found in the Sangham classics. In his speech Mahatma Gandhi, to whom much of the information was a revelation, expressed his happiness and said: "I feel like enrolling myself as a student of this veritable apotheosis of Tamil letters. I wonder when I would be blessed with such an opportunity!"

Undeterred by the infirmities of age, Iyer launched upon his researches into the Sangham classic, *Kuruntokai*. An existing edition of the work was full of mistakes and misrepresentations. Iyer wrote out a detailed commentary on the lyrics in the anthology and planned the edition very carefully. Hundreds of pages were devoted to researched material. Word-for-word meaning, summaries, special notes, comparative illustrations, examples, variant readings and a detailed glossary mark this significant publication. Iyer had a sense of fulfilment when the volume was published in 1937.

Kuruntokai was followed by an edition of the works o Kumaraguruparar, as desired by Swaminatha Tampiran, thef Head of the Tiruppanandal Mutt who had immense regard for Iyer's scholarship. After the volume was published in 1939, Iyer went to Tiruppanandal for a short stay. Several days were

spent in the company of scholars, teachers and poets who came from distant places to have his *darshan.*

One morning at seven o'clock, Iyer was resting in an easy-chair. Some students were sitting near him. The backyard door opened. It was not clear at first who was coming in. Then one noticed that it was the pontiff who was entering quietly.

"Who is coming?" Iyer asked. "Swamigal" replied the students, "It that so?", said Iyer and got up in haste. "You should not have troubled yourself. If you had sent word I would have come myself. Why should your Holiness enter by the backyard and inconvenience yourself?"

> "Is this anything compared to the great benefit conferred by you upon our Mutt? By publishing the writings of Sivakolundu Desikar and Kumaraguruparar you have brought honour to the family where I was born and the Mutt I have entered. I can think of no adequate return for that."

Saying so, the pontiff gave Iyer a silver salver piled up with one thousand rupees. Iyer was overwhelmed. Towards the end of his life he used to recount this incident often with deep emotion.

During the eightieth birthday celebrations, several people asked Iyer to write his autobiography. An admirer sent him Rs. 501 towards publishing his autobiography as he felt that Iyer's autobiography would prove to be a social and literary history of the times. Kalki Krishnamoorthy, Editor of *Ananda Vikatan*, invited him to contribute his autobiography to his journal as a serial. Iyer had no time on hand. However, when Kalki renewed his plea in 1940, Iyer agreed to write 'My Life' as a serial. He wrote to friends in different places in Tamil Nadu and got photographs of buildings and temples to publish along with the narrative. When *En Charithram* began in January 1940, it took the Tamils by storm. Week after week Tamils lived in their near past and learnt a good deal about their own cultural heritage. But as Iyer passed away in April 1942, the autobiography remained unfinished.

Monday, 12 January 1942. Iyer who was lying on a bench in an upstairs room got up at dawn and was preparing to come down when he sustained a fall. His knee was injured and started bleeding. Medical help came immediately and it was found that he had fractured a bone.

The Second World War was on. The residents of Madras were sending away their families to safer places in the interior of Tamil Nadu. It was decided that Iyer should stay in a house belonging to the Tiruavaduturai Mutt in Tirukkalukukunram. On 11th April he left Tyagaraja Vilasam by car. When he started for the journey he seems to have had a premonition.

"You showed several wonderful forms in Kalukukunram, O Lord", he recited from the *Tiruvāchakam*. "Would I be able to come back to this house?" he asked audibly with visible emotion. The car reached the new residence in the evening. Iyer was unhappy that he had left behind his books and palm-leaf manuscripts and was as sad as a mother separated from her child. His son understood this and within a few days brought all of them to him in ten carts.

After coming to the new place there was a change for the better in Iyer's health. He was able to sit up. My family was at Mosur at this time. I received a letter that my father was ill. Before leaving for Mosur, I went to Tirukalukukunram and spent a day with my master. All the while he talked about Tamil literature and his desire to publish Kamban's *Ramayana* and the *Thevāram* in a proper way. "Will you help me edit them by staying with me? Give me your hand", he said. Little did I realise that this would be my last chance of holding those dear, revered hands. I placed then on my eyes. Then I took leave of him and proceeded to Mosur.

Iyer was running a temperature at this time. His son was away at Madras. A telegram was sent to him. But before he could come over, Iyer passed away. His son and myself too felt ever afterwards that we were not given to be at his bedside during his last moments. Tamil had literally been Iyer's life-breath, and he found fulfilment at the Lord's Feet at Tirukalukukunram.

The world of Tamil language and literature mourned the irreparable loss to Tamil scholarship because of Iyer's passing away. A grateful Tamil people remember him as the beloved Grandsire of Tamil (*Tamizh-t-tātta*). The late Srimati Rukmini Devi Arundale established a library at Tiruvanmiyur in his name. Iyer's collection of books and palm-leaf manuscripts are being carefully preserved in this library where scores of Tamil scholars come daily to widen the parameters of their research in Tamil language and literature.

13

Versatile Brilliance

Though Iyer was not educated in the tradition of Western criticism, it is remarkable that he learnt intuitively the latest methods of book publication. Each of the editions of Iyer contained a detailed foreword. This gives information about the work, its distinguishing characteristics, the list of places from where he got the manuscripts and the names of those who helped him with the publication. Even those who had merely helped him to get a manuscript copy would find mention. Of his many fine qualities of head and heart, gratitude came first. Even the assistance of students would get a handsome acknowledgement; he would never ignore them.

From the list of places from where the manuscripts were gathered, we can have a rough idea of his travels and travails. Sometimes his journeys were in vain, but there were also moments of excitement due to a chance discovery. For instance, 'Jasmines in Moonlight' recounts how he came across the *Pattu-p-pāttu* anthology. After a good deal of trouble, Iyer had coaxed one Lakshmana Kavirayar of Alwar Tirunagari to get him some of the old manuscripts which were with the Kavirayar's father-in-law. Iyer sat on the pial of a house and listened to the commentary on Divya Prabhadham explained by some scholars of the place. The image of Nammalwar was being taken out on a ceremonial round, and Iyer prayed to the great poet-devotee in the moonlight for success. At the same time Lakshmana Kavirayar brought him a solitary palm-leaf manuscript. Iyer opened the manuscript bundle immediately and the first words read by him in the moonlight were 'Mullai-p-pāttu' (The Jasmine Song). "My heart blossomed in joy as these jasmines bloomed in that moonlight", writes Iyer and points out that it

was this discovery that led to the publication of *Pattu-p-pāttu* which is one of the basic Sangham classics containing an enormous amount of historical information regarding the classical Timil age.

Iyer is also one of our finest biographers. He never forgot the great men with whom he came into contact during his personal and professional lives and has left behind short or detailed accounts of their lives. Foremost among the biographies is his life of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Such is his devotion to the master that he never calls Pillai by name: it is always 'this great poet', 'this great scholar'. 'this Tamil poet'. Only once when describing Pillai's boyhood does he refer to 'Meenakshi-sundaram".[1] Even here he adds a footnote that he does so with great reluctance.

Written in two parts, the life of Pillai begins with an account of the Mahavidwan's scholarly ancestry and proceeds to detail the boyhood and youth of Pillai when he contended with poverty to acquire an almost limitless knowledge of Tamil literature. The heydey of Pillai's career as a teacher and a poet is delineated carefully with ample references to Pillai's works and choice quotations from the master's pen. Each incident in Pillai's life is reported with care to bring out the essential nobility, humility and compassion of the teacher. Iyer's accounts of Pillai's last days are deeply moving. The chapter on Pillai's personality fondly delineates the Mahavidwan's contentment, patience, compassion, gratitude, devotion to Siva and love for Tamil literature. Pillai's affection for his students, of course, comes for special mention as Iyer had received that in a large measure. Pillai was indeed a walking encyclopaedia and hence the students who were with him gathered a rich harvest in a very short time:

> "His love of Tamil literature was boundless. When reading a work, he would even forget food and sleep. Indeed, often a Tamil classic had proved to be effective medicine for this scholar's illness. While explaining the beautiful nuances of a poem, he would himself be emotionally overwhelmed."

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[1]In the original MIL Tamil version of this monograph, Sri K. V. Jagannathan too refers to his own teacher, Dr. Swaminatha Iyer, throughout as 'my reverend Teacher.'

Pillai's ability to compose poetry fast was ever a cause for wonderment to Iyer.

Among the shorter biographies that Iyer wrote, the life of Tyagaraja Chettiar gains precedence. It was Chettiar who brought Iyer to Kumbakonam College as his successor. Iyer's admiration for Chettiar was great, but he also records what many may have considered as faults in Chettiar's character. For example, Chettiar was extraordinarily bold and would not mince words even if the other person happened to be Meenakshisundaram Pillai himself. But his character was beyond reproach and his scholarship wide and deep. The guardian love he had for Iyer was unique. He came forward to gather monetary help for Iyer when the latter sought to publish *Jeevaka Chintāmani*. As soon as the book came out, Iyer went to Chettiar's house with a copy. It was late at night. Hearing Iyer's voice, Chettiar came out saying, "I have been lying down thinking of you" and embraced him lovingly. Iyer was taken aback. Chettiar explained that a copy had been brought to him by a mutual friend who had read out the introduction, life of the author, summary of the epic and the various glossaries, for Chettiar had by now become totally blind. Chettiar was quite excited and his one sorrow was that Pillai was not alive to see this achievement. His words of praise seemed endless. "What a difficult job! It is no easy task to understand every line of such an obscure epic and then edit it with so much clarity! Such a large book! You have presented Tamils with a rare treasure!"

As Iyer sought to absorb these words, Chettiar spoke with his characteristic frankness. "But I have a complaint too. You have written about the pontiff of Tiruavaduturai and Pillai and not mentioned me at all. I do feel unhappy about it". Iyer felt sad that he had pained such a pure heart, for the omission had not been deliberate:

> "I had no answer. I gave some excuse But when the excuse could not satisfy me, there was no way in which it could have satisfied Chettiar. He forgot it immediately. We spent the whole of the next day conversing about the glories of Tamil literature. He helped me hand over copies of my book to others. Time flew by in the sweet atmosphere of Tamil. I left the day after.

> It is said that if we cause a hurt to others without realising it, one should ask for forgiveness thrice for the hurt to vanish. I tried to do so too. I dedicated my edition of *Ainkuru-nooru* (1903) to him. I named my Madras house after him and arranged for a scholarship in his name to a B.A. student studying in the Kumbakonam College."

However, it remained a sore point with Iyer that he could not do any of these while Chettiar was still alive.

One of the greatest musicians of those days was Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer. His elder brother, Ramaswami Iyer has rendered *Peria Purānam* as an opera. The brothers used to sing together and the genius of Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer was widely known. Iyer moved with him and came to have deep regard for the latter's qualities of head and heart. His biography of the musician along with his biography of Ganam Krishna Iyer gives us several rare details about the condition of classical music in those days. Iyer has also written a life of another great musician-composer, Gopalakrishna Bharatiyar.

The gentle humour of Iyer's style is evident in these volumes too. For instance, Iyer had great love for Bharatiyar's opera, *Nandanar Charithram*. He thought that the author of such a beautiful, melodious work must be a good-looking person too. However, when he met the composer for the first time, he was sorely disappointed. Bharatiyar had a short neck, an ugly face and flat feet. So he noted in the biography: "Does not lovely music flow from the lute which is bent in many places? In the same manner superb songs have issued out of anuncomely form".

Among other brief biographies written by Iyer, mention may be made of Seshiah Sastriar who had been the Dewan of Pudukkottah, Professor Poondi Aranganatha Mudaliyar, K.V. Krishnaswami Iyer and Subramania Bharati. Though belonging to the classical tradition of Tamil poetry, Iyer welcomed Bharati's modern style. At a public meeting in honour of Bharati held in the Congress Building at Madras, Rajaji requested Iyer to speak and the great Tamil scholar gave a brilliant exposition of Bharati's poetry. In his concluding remarks Rajaji said: "Just as Viswamitra's greatness was underlined by Vasishta calling him the Divine Seer, Iyer's praises have imcreased the stature

of Bharati". This was because there were some scholars in those days who did not consider Bharati a poet at all, for he broke the fetters of stultifying prosody.

Iyer himself possessed a crystalline prose style though in poetry he was unable to give up classical metres. When reading Iyer's essays and biographies, there would be no need to use a dictionary. After all, it is only deep waters that are clear when seen from above. Iyer used short sentences. The innermost emotions would be delineated appropriately while he would not neglect to describe the physical characteristics of the person about whom he would be writing. This is what he says of his teacher:

> A mere look would assure you that he possessed simplicity, humility and gentleness. Though endowed with profound scholarship and incomparable poetic imagination, he seemed like a deep sea with its waves stilled, a personality whose unprecedented powers the intellect could not gauge at once.

Iyer has written in detail about Pillai's devotion to Siva. Himself a devotee of Siva, it was but natural that he should admire wholeheartedly this aspect of his master's personality. Thus of Pillai's poetic compositions:

> He was most of the time lost in thought. First he would arrange the details of his subject in his mental horizon. Then would follow an unimpeded flow of verses. The listener would be under the illusion that Pillai was but repeating verses composed earlier! The finest flights of imagination were strung together in mind and we would have a beautiful result in a few minutes and would admire the electrical ease with which the creative imagination was at play. The verses based on *etugai* (rhyme at the start) that were placed at stages in a long poem were called 'rest verses' by him.

In short Iyer's three-dimensional style has made his biographies perfect specimens of cinematographic art.

Iyer had a genius for giving titles to his essays. "Fallen Flowers"is an example. 'Kurinji-p-pāttu', a part of the *Pāttu-p-pāttu*, tells us about two maidens gathering a variety of flowers on a rock. Ninety-nine flowers are mentioned. The manuscript

with him had a lesser number, because some lines were missing. After a long search he found the missing lines in a few loose palm leaves in the Dharmapuram Mutt library. These were but three flowers, and yet their absence had made 'Kurinji-p- pāttu' an incomplete classic. He conveyed back the lines to the appropriate passage in the poem and titled his essay about his search and gain as 'The Fallen Flowers'.

He had a genius for communicating what he wished to through simple words in common parlance. Be it a school boy or a great scholar: Iyer's writings convey delight to all. As befits their experience, readers receive proportionate instruction as well from these writings.

His autobiography, though incomplete, remains a treasure-chest of information. What a variety of people walk through it! Affluent men, good people, evilmongers and timewasters are projected with uncanny ease by the author. But generally it is only the better points in a man's personality that draw Iyer's attention; hence *En Charithram* may be termed a roll-call of charitable, noble, lovable personalities.

Though he was a great lover of Tamil and specialised only in Tamil language and literature, he was not narrow-minded. he did not seek to expel Sanskrit borrowings in the name of 'purifying' the language, for he knew well that a great language can afford to absorb foreign elements and be enriched by them in the long run. Sanskrit words in Iyer's prose merge beautifully with pellucid Tamil to give us the glory of a sublime style.

The fame of Iyer who gave back to the Tamils their unique history will remain undimmed for ever. His prose works are next in importance only to his services in reclaiming the Tamil Sangham classics. They are indeed paintings in prose, granaries of a great culture.

Mahamahopadhyaya **Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer** (1885-1942) lived for the sake of Tamil. While serving as a Tamil pundit for over sixty years, he carried out research in old Tamil classics and published them, thereby extending the horizons of Tamil literature and giving a new life to the great Tamil writings of the Sangam period. He gave us an idea of the social history of those distant times through what was recorded then. Thanks to his Herculean labours in saving from oblivion the palm-leaf manuscripts of old, new researches have become possible. He had the ability to describe historical facts with imaginative understanding. He happens to be also a forerunner in Tamil biographical writing. It can be said that Iyer's publications have influenced in a large measure the thoughts and prose style of modern writers in Tamil.

Subramania Bharati sang of Iyer : "As long as Tamil lives you will know the praise of poets, the gratitude of their hearts, and shine immortal."

Sri K.V. Jagannathan had, in his younger days, been Iyer's student for long; he is also a well-known writer and editor. In this book he has brought to us the exemplary life of Iyer and his great services to the cause of Tamil letters.

Dr. Prema Nandakumar, who has rendered this monograph in English, is the author of *Bharati* and her *Poems of Subramania Bharati* has been sponsored by UNESCO. She has published biography, fiction and criticism in English as well as Tamil.

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